

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 878

FL 014 254

AUTHOR Heckler, Edward E.
TITLE The Acquisition of the Auxiliary by ESL Learners.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (17th, Toronto, Ontario, March 15-20, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Learning; Arabic; *English (Second Language); *Error Patterns; Form Classes (Languages); Higher Education; Japanese; *Second Language Learning; Spanish; *Tenses (Grammar); *Time Factors (Learning)

ABSTRACT

A study of the acquisition of the auxiliary (tense, modal, perfect, and progressive) by 36 adult learners of English as a second language at three levels whose first languages were Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish is reported. The students were given three tests, on oral production, written production, and written reception. Nineteen verb structures were tested. Results showed that the more advanced the student's English level, the better his or her performance in the study. Productive tasks were not performed as well as receptive tasks. Little difference in performance was found between real and nonsense verbs. The overall correct response rate for tense was 71%, slightly higher for past than present tenses. The rate was 57% for verbs following modal, 59% for perfect, and 56% for progressive. The Spanish speakers gave the fewest correct responses, the Arabic speakers the next most, and Japanese speakers the most, corresponding to the students' earlier performance on English placement tests. Further research is recommended with child subjects, more natural language samples, and a larger number of structures tested. (MSE)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED240878

The Acquisition of the Auxiliary by ESL Learners

Edward E. Beckler

Abstract

This experimental study investigated the acquisition of the auxiliary (tense, modal, perfect, progressive) by thirty six adult English second language (ESL) learners whose native languages were Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish. Three tests (one oral and two written) were administered to each learner. The structures of the auxiliary tended to be learned in a nonrandomized order. past tense was learned before present tense; the en of perfect, before the have; and the be of progressive, before the ing. Of the structures that can follow a modal, MV and be were learned before have. The data showed an ascending Spanish-Arab-Japanese order in the number of correct responses.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Edward Heckler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

FL014254

The Acquisition of the Auxiliary by ESL Learners

Edward E. Heckler

March 1983

Recently researchers have been gleaning valuable information about the acquisition of English morphemes by first language (L1) learners and English second language (ESL) learners (Berko 1958; Brown 1983; Dulay and Burt 1974; Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982; Mace-Matluck 1979). The most frequently studied morphemes have been plural, possessive, progressive, third person singular, past regular, and copula. Usually the data indicated "the stable ordering of these morphemes in the normal acquisition of English as a first language" (de Villiers and de Villiers 1978:94). Some ordering differences among ESL learners, though, have occurred.

Research on verb acquisition in English has been limited to mainly tense (both present and past) and progressive morphemes, while a few studies expanded the investigation to include perfect (Fletcher 1981) and modal (Fletcher 1979; Major 1974). In short, little information on verb acquisition for either L1 or ESL learners exists. The purpose of this experimental study is to provide an overview of the acquisition of the auxiliary by ESL learners.

Subjects

Serving as the subjects of this study were thirty six adult ESL learners studying at the English Language Center of Michigan State University. Twelve subjects spoke Arabic as their native language; twelve spoke Japanese; twelve spoke Spanish. Each native

language group of twelve ESL subjects was composed of four beginners, four intermediates, and four advanced learners.

Research Procedure

Three tests, each with seventy items, were given to each subject in this order: oral production, written production, and written reception. For the oral production test, the examiner showed each subject a cartoon figure performing a task. Then the examiner read a statement about the figure and asked the subject to fill in a blank in the sentence with a one-word oral response. Whenever the correct answer was a form of the main verb, the subject was asked to repeat orally the main verb in the form that it appeared in the statement. Whenever the answer was a form of be or a form of have, no repetition to determine pronunciation was asked of the subject. All responses to the oral production test were taped and written down. For the written production test, the subject wrote a one-word response in the blank for each test item. On the written reception test, the subject chose the correct answer from four possibilities.

The morphology test by Berko (1958) served as the research model. This study, an expansion and modification of Berko's pioneering research, tested ESL acquisition of the auxiliary. According to transformational grammar, the auxiliary in English consists of the four structures stated in this phrase structure rule:

Auxiliary————→ Tense (Modal) (Perfect) (Progressive) plus
the Main Verb (MV), the simple uninflected form of the traditional

verb (Culicover 1982). The parentheses indicate the structure is optional. The phrase structure rule can be rewritten as

Auxiliary $\longrightarrow$ Tense (Modal) (have+en) (be+ing) MV.

In addition, this study included the passive transformation that can be added as be+en at the end of the auxiliary:

Auxiliary $\longrightarrow$ Tense (Modal) (have+en) (be+ing) (be+en) MV.

For each verb structure being tested, a pair of questions was included, one with a nonsense word and one with a real word. Nonsense words were created for the main verbs; none were created for the modals (with only can, may, must, shall, and will substitutable), the forms of be, and the forms of have since no substitutes will work. Nonsense words were used to reveal whether the ESL learner had internalized the rules and not merely memorized specific structures.

Tense, always obligatory in the auxiliary, means present and past inflectional endings, not time. Present tense is rewritten as the suffix -s (e.g. she cooks) or $\emptyset$ (I cook). For regular verbs past tense is rewritten as the suffix -ed (e.g. he hunted). As -s, $\emptyset$, or -ed, tense is always added to the first word, and only the first word, that follows it in the auxiliary. Structures 1, 2, 12, 14, 17, and 19 given in Table 1 tested for tense.

For modal, this study tested for the simple, uninflected form of have (perfect), be (progressive or passive), or MV, which follows immediately after the modal (see structures 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10 in Table 1). The choice between have or be depends on the ESL learner's

recognition of the use of perfect, progressive, passive or MV. Recognizing that a simple, uninflected form is required after a modal is the essential desideratum. The variable meanings in the modals, past or present, made testing for them impractical.

This study also tested for both have and en, the past participle, of perfect. When perfect occurs as the first optional structure in the auxiliary, it will take the form has, have or had, depending on tense and subject agreement. This test included, for have of perfect, has (as in he has been building) and have (as in he could have written) and, for en of perfect, been (as in one has been opened). Structures 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 given in Table 1 tested for perfect.

In addition, this study tested for both be and ing, the present participle, of progressive. When progressive occurs as the first optional structure in auxiliary, it will take either present (am, is, are) or past (was, were) forms; only were of these possibilities (as in the flowers were being watered) was tested. After any modal, be always occurs (as in she should be playing). After perfect, been always occurs (as in he should have been fixing). Structures 6, 9, 13, 16, 17, and 18 given in Table 1 tested for progressive.

Because of the complexity of the auxiliary, not all possible verb structures were tested. Only the nineteen structures listed in Table 1 were tested. Each capitalized word represents the structure that the subject was asked to provide with an appropriate one-word verb. Structures tested included present and past tense, have and en

of perfect, be and ing of progressive, be of passive, and MV. One research item for each of the nineteen structures is given in Table 2.

An example taken from Tables 1 and 2 will illustrate the experimental testing. To test for acquisition of structure 13 (tense have+EN BE+ing MV) in Table 1, each subject was asked orally the corresponding structural item 13 in Table 2:

The man is rowing a boat now.

He has _____ rowing it since noon.

Been, the expected answer, served two structural roles here. It was both en of perfect and be of progressive. When results for this item were recorded, the responses were listed under both en of perfect and be of progressive. Most answers, although only single words, thus represented two structural roles in the auxiliary.

Results

Several results emerge from this study. One is that the level of a student's proficiency in English usually indicated the level of performance. For every test item, advanced students gave more correct responses than beginners. Correct responses by intermediate students usually fell in between those by the beginning and the advanced ESL students.

The type of task contributed to the ease or the difficulty with which the learners performed the task. Productive tasks, those in

which ESL learners supplied new language data, were not performed as well as receptive tasks, those in which the learners supplied no new language data. In this study the correct responses on the receptive task (the multiple-choice test) nearly always outnumbered those on each productive task (the oral test and the fill-in test). Similarly, the written tasks were performed much better than the oral task. Correct responses on each written task (the fill-in test and the multiple-choice test) usually outnumbered those on the oral task (the oral test). In short, the greatest number of correct responses occurred on the multiple-choice written reception test; the fewest, on the oral production test. The number of correct responses on the fill-in written production test usually fell in the middle.

Besides these tasks, another one required the learner to provide answers using both real and nonsense verbs. Tests results indicated little difference in task performance in the use of real or nonsense verbs (Heckler 1975:143).

Test results indicated that the correct response percentage (CRP) by ESL learners for all tense (all present and past) equalled 71%. Correct past responses (72%) were given more often than those for present s (69%) (see Table 3). Of the six structures testing tense, the correct response percentage for only one (PAST+ progressive + passive at 39%) fell below 60% (see Table 1). Both syntactically and semantically this structure is complex. Correct responses for two structures (PAST + MV) (81%) and (PRESENT S + MV) (74%) ranked above

all others. Table 4 ranks all structures by correct response percentage; the SS Number indicates the Table 1 number for the same structure. The ESL learners performed very well on tense. Other research studies have indicated the relatively early learning of present and past tense inflections by L1 and ESL subjects (Berko 1958; Brown 1973; Dulay and Burt 1974).

The oral task also tested for acquisition of third-person-singular present-s allomorphs (pronounced as -s, -z, or Iz) and past regular allomorphs (pronounced as -t, -d, or -Id). Present s responses for -s (54%) and -z (56%) occurred more often than those for -Iz (38%). In fact whenever the ESL learners answered with third-person-singular present s, they always gave the appropriate allomorph. For past tense, -t and -d allomorphs, when required, were given as the correct response (55% and 51% respectively) more frequently than -Id (38%). Other studies have also noted the late learning of both -Iz and -Id allomorphs (Berko 1958; Brown 1973).

For verbs following modal, the ESL learners scored a 57% correct response, a much lower percentage than that for tense (71%). Of the three uninflected verbs (have, be, or MV) that immediately follow a modal, very little difference resulted in correct answers with MV (70%) and be (69%). Correct answers for have (39%), however, were considerably lower (see Tables 1 and 3). Of the two be structures on the test, results varied greatly. Correct responses for passive (modal + BE+en + MV) at 80% greatly surpassed those for progressive

(modal + BE+ing + MV) at 58% and also those for modal + MV at 70%. Responses for modal + passive and for modal + progressive were greater than those for modal + perfect + MV (30%), the least well learned modal structure. The responses for modal + perfect + progressive totalled 44% and those for modal + perfect + passive totalled 53%. Studying the results of an imitation task on modal + progressive and modal + perfect by L1 children, Major (1974:55) concluded that "progressives were easier for the children than perfects." This present study of adult ESL learners reached the same conclusion. One reason for the outcome on this test is that ESL learners much more readily substituted be of progressive or passive for have of perfect than they substituted have for be (Heckler 1975:56-63, 77-83).

Correct responses for perfect (have+en) totalled 59%, a slightly higher percentage than the ESL learners gave modal (57%), but a considerably lower percentage than that for tense (71%). The results for en, the past participle, (67%) were much better than those for have (48%) (Table 3). Four instances occurred in which both have and en were tested in identical structures. In every instance more correct responses were given for en than for have (Table 5). Among L1 speakers the acquisition of perfect is late, according to the little evidence available (Brown 1973; Fletcher 1979 and 1981). This late acquisition of perfect "is due not so much to the grammatical complexity of these forms as to the complexity of the ideas being expressed, since such tenses presuppose a sophisticated awareness of

time and the completion of activity" (de Villiers and de Villiers 1978:87).

Overall results for progressive (be+ing) at 56% approximated those for modal (57%) and perfect (59%), but not those for tense (71%). Correct responses to be of progressive totalled 59%, while those for ing totalled 48% (Table 3). In contrast to these figures, most L1 and ESL researchers report the very early acquisition of progressive, particularly ing (Brown 1973; Mace-Matluck 1979). These researchers, though, usually only analyzed the structure BE+ING + MV. This study included progressive + modal, perfect, and passive too (Table 1). One structure tested for be+ING + MV with a 58% correct response, the same percentage that occurred for modal + BE+ing + MV. Of the progressive structures, those with perfect were the best learned (have+EN BE+ing +MV) (73%) and (modal + have+EN + BE+ing + MV) (68%). The lowest percentage was that for passive (BE+ing + be+en) (39%). No item in this study tested for BE+ing + MV.

The data by native language group indicated a trend. The Spanish usually gave the fewest correct responses, while the Japanese gave the most; correct responses by the Arabs often fell in the middle. Why should speakers of Japanese, a non-Indo-European language, consistently score higher than speakers of Spanish, an Indo-European language with more similarities to English in both grammar and vocabulary?

Scores on the English placement test given to the subjects at the beginning of their study at Michigan State University gave the answer.

Composite scores for proficiency in grammar, composition, and aural comprehension for the three language groups were similar: the Spanish, out of 100 points, averaged 62; the Arabs, 65; the Japanese, 65. Scores in grammar, the main ability tested here, varied: out of 100 points the Spanish averaged 58; the Arabs, 63; the Japanese, 67. The findings of this study confirmed the placement results; consequently, the ranking by language groups has only marginal value.

Discussion

This study explored the acquisition of the English auxiliary by adult ESL learners. Of the four elements in the auxiliary, tense is always obligatory, while modal, perfect, and progressive are optional elements that sometimes occur. The percentage of correct responses in this study for the only obligatory element, tense, (71%) was considerably greater than those corresponding percentages for the optional modal (57%), perfect (59%), and progressive (56%).

Language acquisition researchers, for example, Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982:207), believe that "groups of structures are acquired, rather than one structure at a time." It is, therefore, unlikely that the ranking of the nineteen structures given in Table 4 would be exactly the same for other ESL learners.

Several trends concerning ESL acquisition of auxiliary have emerged from the data. While past tense responses (72%) were slightly better than present s responses (69%), their percentage was nearly the same.

Of the uninflected verbs that follow modal, MV (70%) and be (69%) were acquired at about the same rate; have (39%) occurred much later. For perfect, en (67%) was acquired better than have (48%). Be of progressive (59%) was acquired better than ing (48%).

Several points also need to be considered. First, while many studies have tested child ESL learners, only adult ESL learners were tested here. Researchers have suggested that both adults and children, however, acquire grammatical structures in the same sequence (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982:209-11; Krashen, Sferlazza, Feldman, and Fathman 1967:148-9).

Secondly, many L1 and ESL acquisition studies have analyzed the data elicited from natural speech and writing (Brown 1973; Dulay and Burt 1974; Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982). In contrast, the present study analyzed carefully controlled test data, not more spontaneous natural language. Although test items can provide language data that may not be easily obtained in natural language, the test data do not necessarily reveal insights into the acquisition of spontaneous natural language (Krashen 1982).

Finally, the complexity of the auxiliary itself, the small number of possible structures actually tested, and the small number of learners providing data for this test limit any generalizations about auxiliary acquisition. While little is known about the order in which L1 learners acquire the auxiliary (Fletcher 1979; Fletcher 1981; Major 1974),

even less is known about the order for ESL learners. This study has provided a glimpse into that learning but more research on verb acquisition by both L1 and ESL learners needs to be done.

REFERENCES

- Berko, Jean. 1958. The Child's Learning Of English Morphology. Word 14: 150-177.
- Brown, Roger. 1973. A First Language. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Culicover, Peter W. 1982. Syntax. New York: Academic Press.
- de Villiers, Jill G., and Peter A. de Villiers. 1978. Language Acquisition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dulay, Heidi, and Marina Burt. 1974. Natural Sequences In Child Second Language Acquisition. Language Learning 24, 1:37-53.
- Dulay, Heidi, Marina Burt, and Stephen Krashen. 1982. Language Two. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fletcher, Paul. 1979. The Development Of The Verb Phrase. In Paul Fletcher and Michael Garman (Eds.), Language Acquisition, 261-284. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fletcher, Paul. 1981. Description And Explanation Of The Acquisition Of Verb-Forms. Journal Of Child Language 8, 1:93-108.
- Heckler, Edward E. 1975. The Acquisition Of English Verb Morphology By Nonnative Speakers. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University.
- Krashen, Stephen D. 1982. Principles And Practice In Second Language Acquisition. New York: Pergamon Press.

- Krashen, Stephen D., Victoria Sferlazza, Lorna Feldman, and Ann Fathman. 1976. Adult Performance On The Slope Test: More Evidence For A Natural Sequence In Adult Second Language Acquisition. Language Learning 26, 1:145-151.
- Mace-Matluck, Betty J. 1979. The Order of English Structures By Spanish Speaking Children: Some Possible Determinants. In Roger W. Andersen (Ed.), The Acquisition And Use of Spanish And English As First And Second Languages, 75-89. Washington, DC: TESOL.
- Major, Diana. 1974. The Acquisition Of Modal Auxiliaries In The Language Of Children. The Hague: Mouton.

TABLE 1

Auxiliary Structures Tested and Total Correct Response Percentages

<u>T</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>PERF</u>	<u>PROG</u>	<u>PASS</u>	<u>MV</u>	<u>CRP</u>
1 PRES S					MV	74%
2 PAST					MV	81%
3 t	m				MV	70%
4 t	m	HAVE+en			mv	30%
5 t	m	HAVE+en	be+ing		mv	44%
6 t	m	have+EN	BE+ing		mv	68%
7 t	m	HAVE+en		be+en	mv	53%
8 t	m	have+EN		BE+en	mv	65%
9 t	m		BE+ing		mv	58%
10 t	m			BE+en	mv	80%
11 t		have+EN			MV	64%
12 PRES S		HAVE+en	be+ing		mv	70%
13 t		have+EN	BE+ing		mv	73%
14 PRES S		HAVE+en		be+en	mv	60%
15 t		have+EN		BE+en	mv	75%
16 t			be+ING		MV	58%
17 PAST			BE+ing	be+en	mv	39%
18 t			be+ING	BE+en	mv	38%
19 PRES S				BE+en	mv	63%

TABLE 2

Sample Structure Items on the Test

- 1 This woman knows how to cook. She is cooking now.
She does it every day. Every day she _____.
- 2 This boy knows how to hunt. He is hunting now.
He did the same thing yesterday. Yesterday he _____.
- 3 This woman works very hard. She has to do it every week.
What must she do next week? Next week she must _____ very hard.
- 4 The boy didn't write a letter to his girl friend until
yesterday. He could _____ written the letter earlier.
- 5 The man was watching TV for many hours. He became very bored.
He must _____ been watching TV too long.
- 6 The man was fixing his car.
He should have _____ fixing his house instead.
- 7 The man could not win the race. He was sick and didn't
run well; otherwise, the race would _____ been won by him.
- 8 The girl saw a dead animal on the road.
The animal might have _____ hit by a car.
- 9 The girl plays with her dog every afternoon. It is now 3 p.m.
She should _____ playing with her dog now.
- 10 The man is cutting the tree. He will cut another tree soon.
Soon another tree will _____ cut by the man.
- 11 This boy knows how to walk. He has done it recently.
What has he done recently? Recently he has _____.
- 12 The man is building a boat now.
He _____ been building the boat since last week.

13 The man is rowing a boat now.

He has _____ rowing it since noon.

14 The girl is playing a record.

It _____ been playing before

15 The woman is opening the letters.

One has _____ opened before.

16 The men smoke their pipes every day.

In fact, they were _____ their pipes yesterday.

17 The girls water the flowers every afternoon.

What was happening to the flowers yesterday afternoon?

Yesterday afternoon the flowers _____ being watered.

18 The man is throwing the ball now. What is happening

to the ball? The ball is _____ thrown by the man.

19 The people are enjoying the music. Most people enjoy music.

Music _____ enjoyed by most people.

TABLE 3

Percentage of Total Correct Responses for Auxiliary Structures

(A) TENSE	<u>CRP</u>
all PRESENT S and PAST	71%
PAST	72%
PRESENT S	69%
(B) MODAL	
all MODAL	57%
MV	70%
BE	69%
HAVE	39%
(C) PERFECT	
all HAVE+EN	59%
EN	67%
HAVE	48%
(D) PROGRESSIVE	
all BE+ING	56%
BE	59%
ING	48%

TABLE 4

Ranking of Structures by Correct Response Percentage

<u>Rank</u>	<u>SS Number</u>	<u>CRP</u>
1	2	81%
2	10	80%
3	15	75%
4	1	74%
5	13	73%
6A	3	70%
6B	12	70%
8	6	68%
9	8	65%
10	11	64%
11	19	63%
12	14	60%
13A	9	58%
13B	16	58%
15	7	53%
16	5	44%
17	17	39%
18	18	38%
19	4	30%

TABLE 5

Correct Response Percentages for Identical HAVE-EN Perfect Structures

<u>HAVE</u>	<u>CRP</u>	<u>EN</u>	<u>CRP</u>
A. HAVE+en be+ing	(70%)	A. have+EN BE+ing	(73%)
B. HAVE+en be+en	(60%)	B. have+EN BE+en	(75%)
C. modal HAVE+en be+ing	(44%)	C. modal have+EN BE+ing	(68%)
D. modal HAVE+en be+en	(53%)	D. modal have+EN BE+en	(65%)